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Chatterton, The Black  
Death, and Meriwether  
Lewis, Three Plays by  
Charles Reznikoff.

OCT 24 '22





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✓ CHATTERTON ✓

*Scene One*

(*The tombs of Canyng, his wife, and Rowley within a church. From their tombs*)

CANYNGE. The marble flooring of my vault  
had fallen in,  
And into me, waist-deep in sand, an elm  
Struck its twisted roots.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. On my smooth body  
That knew silk and wool only,  
Ant-hills like sores.

ROWLEY. My enemy, the clock,  
Talked me, the poet, down at last.  
Live, while you can, Chatterton,  
Until the mortgagee forecloses  
Upon Bristol and your spacious sky.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. Bristol,  
Beside the blue flowing water.

CHATTERTON. No wonder you ghosts cry  
out against  
The clamp of death,  
Lord Mayor Canyng, Lady Mayoress, and  
Priest Rowley.  
Any weather is fair weather to a warm coat.  
I eat in the kitchen, sleep with the footboy.  
They send to peep upon me, copying Mr. Lam-  
bert's documents,  
Hours: eight to eight. Sister and mother take  
in sewing.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Lambert," and "Thank  
you, Mrs. Lambert";

Colston's charity-boy thanks you.

Trifles. Have you had a pebble in a shoe?

A hair on your tongue, a grain of sand in  
your eye?

Do this and this and be back sharp.

If I could only leave and be alone,

Not stolen jotting.

The heart fills and fills, no end to seeing.

You are young, you were just seventeen;

I have lived one-fourth of my life, if I live  
to be seventy.

ROWLEY. The sun, the air, water when  
thirsty, bread and fruit,

When lean and hungered into exaltation,

Stretching along a bed when tired, and waking

To listen to the night over the house,

So easily are the living joyful.

CHATTERTON. A man with a grain of sand  
in his eye

Can not see the sun.

CANYNGE. Prisoners have been known  
To scoop their way, using fingers only,

Under walls sunk deeply into earth; or with  
an iron nail

Scratch out the mortar holding stone and bars.  
So I, scullion, became merchant and Lord

Mayor. Step by step, distances.

CHATTERTON. Prisoners are prisoners usually.

ROWLEY. Men, brick by brick, have made  
such work;

Were these not troubled too by this and that?  
While you live,  
You may outfly eagles;  
Because you are not eagle, but a man.  
Live, Chatterton! the earth is man's and star  
by star in time.

CHATTERTON. Sundays I have walked the  
streets and seen  
Men and women, and girls two by two, and  
men alone,  
Dressed in their Sunday clothes, their faces  
ugly;  
And thought, Through these rushes I can  
tread any way I please.

CANYNGE'S WIFE. Holiday nights when the  
weather was warm,  
We used to walk about,  
In silence, or talking softly close to one an-  
other,  
Houses and trees in moonlight.

CHATTERTON. I have seen them pass and  
turn the corner,  
Colors shining in their wings and their heads  
rubies.  
I will begin building myself webs,  
Delicate thought leading to delicate thought.

ROWLEY. To catch flies?

CHATTERTON. To catch an earth tumbling  
on through space  
And suck it dry. I have made a Bristol out  
of rhyme  
And peopled it with nobles, sat at their feasts,

Talked and heard;  
But I am tired of make-believe, of being a  
scrivener's apprentice,  
Mother and sister, sempstresses, a family of  
servants.  
Some mole from prison;  
But I shout the way Jews shouted at Jericho.  
There are birds in heaven, who rides Pegasus  
may catch some.  
Days like grains of sand slip through my  
fingers,  
While I am idle on this accidental shore where  
I was born;  
But I have feet to walk away and maybe  
wings.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER (*is heard calling*).

Tommy, Tommy!

Time to be back at Mr. Lambert's.

### *Scene Two*

BURGUM (*to his wife*). Here, a document  
that may interest you:

My family tree. You see the name  
Was once de Bergham. Norman de Bergham  
who fought at Hastings.  
You didn't think when you were marrying  
A pewterer, that he had blue blood.  
As in a fairy tale, the beggar is a prince.  
Here's the coat of arms.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Yes,  
Like a fairy tale. This document  
Does not look old.

BURGUM. Of course not.  
It is a copy of the originals.

There is a boy named Chatterton.  
His uncle is the sexton of St. Mary's.  
The boy played at dolls with the church's  
Old parchments, learned his letters from them.  
Colston's apprenticed him to Mr. Lambert,  
The scrivener. Now and then the boy still  
visits

The old church, rummages the papers,  
Hopes to become an antiquarian, if you please.  
The other day he came upon my name,  
That is, de Bergham, and knowing of me,  
Searched and found all, of which he made  
This copy. I saw the originals.  
They are, of course, the church's. They were  
smoky,  
As if candle-smoked, scarcely read.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Perhaps it is a swindle.  
Did you give  
Money?

BURGUM. He is not bright enough to swin-  
dle;  
Dreamy, the kind swindled. As proud as  
Punch,  
Too proud to stoop to petty knavery.  
I gave him five shillings. Perhaps,  
I swindled him: a lot of work here.

BURGUM'S WIFE. Five shillings for that  
paper!  
I scrimp and you waste money so.

BURGUM. He went to so much trouble.  
And really he did not want the money.  
I had to urge him. He seemed displeased.

BURGUM'S WIFE. That he could get no more.

BURGUM. That he was tipped  
For just a friendly service, I thought.  
He is a friendly boy . . .  
I have been thinking . . . we are growing old.  
If we had children, a girl, perhaps, to help you,  
Or a lad, a lad like this,  
Whom I could teach my business, what I  
have learnt  
At such cost . . .  
Perhaps the shop would be less dull.  
The lad comes of decent folk, is poor,  
And starved for friendship—it was just a  
fancy.

BURGUM'S WIFE. We have been alone together  
So many years. Perhaps a nephew—but a  
stranger  
At the table and beside the fire.  
Why should we change?

BURGUM. It was just a fancy.

### *Scene Three*

(*In Walpole's mansion-hause, Strawberry Hill*)

WALPOLE (*giving a manuscript*). The poems  
of which I wrote you, Gray,  
Those found in a church at Bristol, the work  
Of one Rowley, a priest when Edward the  
Fourth was king.  
Spirited and harmonious.  
I wrote this Chatterton to send more.

These came and this about himself:  
A poor widow's son, apprenticed to a scrivener,  
The work irks him, and won't I send money  
That he may buy freedom and spend time in writing.  
It seems he dabbles in verse or wants to dabble.

GRAY (*who has been dipping into the manuscript*). A forgery!  
This is modern as yesterday's gazette:  
Modern words, consonants merely doubled;  
Obsolete words, taken from any glossary to Chaucer,  
Stuck into an idiom, modern as yesterday's gazette.

WALPOLE. Why flare up? The worm would crawl  
Out of his rain-filled hole.  
Of course, I'll write him to stand his apprenticeship, practice the profession,  
And when he will have made his fortune, write.  
But why should you be angry at him, Gray?  
What could your mother, the milliner, have done?  
By chance, you had an uncle, rich and childless.  
Uncle Antrobus made Eton and Cambridge possible,  
Travel and contemplation, time to see, think, write.  
After all, the *Elegy* is your only poem.  
You felt *that*, how narrowly you might have been  
Another "mute, inglorious Milton" in the host,

The "youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown".  
As for me, Walpole's son,  
From *Strawberry Hill* I dare not write un-  
kindly  
To this Bristol starveling.

GRAY. Kind of you, Walpole.

WALPOLE. Then I'll not write at all. I'll let  
it drop.

The lad's a swindler. Why should I help him?  
If he's a poet, that's his pleasure.  
If he's a man, he'll stand on his own feet.  
If he cannot and his poetry is lost,  
A lot is lost. How many poets do wars kill,  
And plagues? Ten thousand acorns on the  
oak,

That one oak may grow again.  
Why should I water acorns? Besides,  
The lad has home, food, and not arduous  
work,

Why should he beg? The great poets, Gray,  
Have been citizens, capable  
In the business about them: Aeschylus,  
A soldier with the rest at Marathon,  
Sophocles, an admiral, Dante,  
The politician, and Shakespeare—  
Not recluses in a college like you, Gray.

GRAY. Certainly not forgers.

WALPOLE. Why should you be angry at him,  
Gray?  
What could your mother, the milliner, have  
done,  
Unless your Uncle Antrobus . . .

*Scene Four*

LAMBERT'S MOTHER (*to servant*). Tell your master that I must see him At once! (*To Lambert when he comes*). That charity-school brat! Read this: Suicide, if we do not let him go. Suddenly to come upon a body, Like stepping on a mouse in a dark hallway; Or have a servant rush up to me, Hear a shriek in the next room; let him go!

LAMBERT. What's this? A will and testament?

LAMBERT'S MOTHER. It says that he is going to kill himself And so writes this, his last testament. Where is he?

LAMBERT. Safe in the office. I'll pound him good and proper for the joke, Wasting time in writing this And scaring you.

LAMBERT'S MOTHER. Don't bother with him. Cancel his prentice papers, rid the house of him. He quarrels with the servants; makes such faces, Talking to me or you, some day he'll spring at us. And what have we done? We've given him a good home, God knows, And you are teaching him your own profession. I used to offer buns or a tart at first, Carried them in my pocket just for him;

But he would glare so at me, refuse,  
And snarl his thanks. He's out of his mind,  
And if he should do, what here he threatens,  
There'll be no stilling the town's talk,  
How we ill-used the orphan and drove him  
to it.

Your friends may call upon the council  
For investigations; then we are  
At a spiteful servant's mercy. Pack him off!  
I won't sleep another night  
With that boy in the house.

LAMBERT. This will of his  
Will be a good excuse. I have been disap-  
pointed

More than I cared to tell you. Those at Col-  
ston's

Thought highly of him, highly enough  
To apprentice him to a scrivener; but he has  
proved

Unaccountably dull at times, lazy and insolent,  
Not in so many words, but, as you say, in  
manner.

I'll have him in. (*To footman*) Send in Chat-  
terton.

Send for his mother, too.

(*To Chatterton*) Well, my whippersnapper,  
So you're going to commit suicide.  
Here's a pocket-knife. Or perhaps,  
Mother will send for arsenic, which the porter  
Makes into a paste for rats.

LAMBERT'S MOTHER. Stop!

LAMBERT. So you don't like being my ap-  
prentice.

You needn't be. You were glad enough

To become such, if I remember.  
Wait here until your mother comes.  
We'll sign the necessary quittance  
And then, march! Look here,  
If you make such faces at me,  
I'll smash your face. You're still  
My apprentice and I have the right  
To beat you, which I have never done,  
I ought to be ashamed to say. (*Lambert and his mother go out.*)

### *Scene Five*

(*The same room in Lambert's house at twilight.*)

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. Why does he keep us waiting so?  
O Tommy, are you sure you're right?  
You didn't intend suicide, did you, Tommy?

CHATTERTON. Mother, quit calling me Tommy.  
Of course I didn't intend suicide;  
It was a trick to scare Lambert,  
And make him let me go; didn't it work?

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. Everybody thought it such a good thing,  
When Mr. Lambert took you for his apprentice.  
And you did, too.

CHATTERTON. I was sick of that school,  
Boys and masters.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. You were glad enough to be taken into Colston's.  
It is not for anybody's asking.

CHATTERTON. I would have learnt more by myself  
At home. I thought that they would teach Greek and Hebrew, English; they taught arithmetic  
And how to write in a good, round hand—  
What else?

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. That, too, is needed, Thomas.

CHATTERTON. For me,  
Life is too short-winded and strength too weak  
To waste. I thought through Lambert  
To escape, that here I would have—for myself—more time.  
I have, but not enough.  
I grudge fractions of my life  
To copying mortgages.

CHATTERTON'S MOTHER. But how are you to make a living?

CHATTERTON. From the work I want to do. *The Gentlemen's Magazine* of London  
Has taken a poem of mine;  
I have two essays in the next *Cave's Monthly*;  
And one who plans a new magazine,  
Writes me from London, "Thomas Chatterton, Esquire,  
Dear Sir:—I count upon your help" and so forth.  
You and sister will go in silks;  
The proudest here in Bristol will be glad to know you.  
How can I stay in Bristol four years more  
To become at last a scrivener,  
When I have now such work and future in London.

FOOTMAN. Mr. Lambert will see you. (*The darkened room is left empty.*)

### *Scene Six*

(*Chatterton is writing in a dingy room. A fat old woman, Mrs. Ballance, enters. She seats herself. Chatterton keeps staring in her face.*)

MRS. BALLANCE. You must excuse me, Cousin Tommy, but as your mother's cousin, And older than yourself; as it were, in charge of you;  
For didn't your mother send you here to live? You have been in London going on two weeks. At first, quite proper and natural, A young man to go about, seeing the town; And London must seem so big to you from Bristol,  
I know how it was when I came to London; But you can't keep on so, now can you? You must try for a place in an office. I wouldn't speak of any kind of work For a young man like you, Who likes to read and practices penmanship; But a genteel clerkship in an office? And must you stay up the night long? It isn't good for the eyes and you're looking peaked as it is.  
You needn't stare so, Tommy. The young man who rooms with you, has complained to Mr. Walmsley, "I can't sleep nights with him having his candle lit and scratching paper." It isn't I that am complaining, child. I only mean the best for you. Young people complain, but we old Are glad to take the world as it is. Many a bitter talk I had with myself, Or with father and mother, and later with Ballance; And here am I, an old woman, Pains in me every moment I'm awake, Husband dead and little I knew of him When he was alive, sailing the seas, And no children, never had any; I go on living quietly,

Doing chores I'm lucky enough to get,  
Frying my bit of supper at night;  
Thank God, a roof over me.  
When I die, I'll say to God,  
Just like a lady leaving a party,  
"I've had a fine time, thank You."  
Not that I mean it all, but He'll know  
I mean some of it, and after all,  
He does the best He can, I suppose . . .

### Scene Seven

(*The office of Fell, owner and editor of The Freeholder's Magazine.*)

FELL. Mr. Chatterton! Sit down, sir. Here. The chair is rickety, But, pshaw! this is all makeshift. I am to be in funds. A lord— I have sincere promises. Then, sir, you will see a large room, Grey carpet, delft blue curtains, No furniture at all, sir, Just desk and chair, and next to these, A visitor's chair. Space! If I had money, I would build a house On a hill, overlooking a sweep of fields; and I would have Great loaves baked in my ovens. Whoever wanted to, Could come and live with us . . . You are young, Mr. Chatterton, For your mature style. Your letters are as good as Junius. Mr. Wilkes remarked your letters. We must have you meet the Lord Mayor. You did well to come. In a month, You'll be the talk of London, young as you are; You'll be gaped at in the coffee-houses. *The Freeholder's Magazine* is proud To have your writings. Come, your promise! You must show me everything.

CHATTERTON. I am sorry, Mr. Fell, but Mr.

Hamilton of *Town and Country*  
Has bespoken an article, ten pounds to be  
paid me; but other—

FELL. The Court's enemies—and the Court  
Has enemies—are raising a fund.  
*The Freeholder's Magazine* has become  
A power; it must not be allowed to fall, to  
slacken.  
For the next issue I must have from you . . .

### *Scene Eight*

CHATTERTON'S SISTER (*is reading a letter to  
their mother and grandmother.*) . . . settled  
in comfortable lodgings in Brooke Street  
where I have a room to myself.

I shall engage to write a history of England  
for Mr. Dodsley, the bookseller. Mr. Wilkes  
knows me by my writings. He has affirmed  
what Fell had of mine could not be the prod-  
uct of a youth. Creditors have sent Fell to  
King's Bench, he having offended certain per-  
sons; but I am bettered by this. His suc-  
cessors in *The Freeholder's Magazine* will be  
glad to engage me on my terms. Buy the  
next number of *Town and Country*. It has  
an article of mine for which I have been paid  
ten pounds.

I am to be introduced to Mr. Beckford, the  
Lord Mayor. I will ensure Mrs. Ballance an  
allowance from The Trinity House, a founda-  
tion for widows of deserving seamen.

Do not worry about my clothes. London  
is not Bristol. Dress is not discussed here.  
If a man dresses well, praise; but if not, noth-  
ing is said. He is prudent.

Tell Katon and Mease to send me whatever  
poems they have and I will see them placed.  
I am sending you some trifling presents: six  
cups and saucers with two basins, two fans,  
and for grandmother, some tobacco and a  
pipe.

*Scene Nine*

(*The room in back of Hodge's shop. Hodge's wife at the window.*)

HODGE'S WIFE. Quick, husband, there he goes. Run and ask him in.

HODGE. You know I've asked many a time And he's refused.

HODGE'S WIFE. But now he's starving. Look, how pale and thin he's grown and can hardly walk. Hurry!

HODGE. Why should I keep humiliating myself  
Before a boy, who is nothing after all to me,  
A stranger, who moves into a garret next door  
a month ago,  
And in another month out and away.  
I offer what slight help I can, am rebuffed,  
That's the end of it.  
Who offers bones to stray curs—that snap.

HODGE'S WIFE. You're a man and he's only  
a silly proud boy.  
He's starving and we have so much.  
Quick! he's at his door. Go or I'll go.

HODGE. You soft-hearted fool! (*He kisses her and goes out. She prepares bread and butter and tea. Her husband comes back with Chatterton.*)

CHATTERTON. Pardon me . . . your husband insisted . . .

HODGE'S WIFE. We are always glad to have a guest for tea. Won't you sit here? (*They sit down. At first Chatterton eats slowly, then gorges.*)

CHATTERTON. Pardon me . . . I had so much to do,

Rose late for breakfast and quite forgot  
lunch—

And now myself. No more, thank you.  
I find that eating makes me stupider than I  
am.

HODGE'S WIFE. But we must eat.

CHATTERTON. Yes, we are that much ani-  
mal,

Not trees, chained to earth,  
Nor even beasts with four feet on it;  
But if we could like moths that have no en-  
trails,  
Live our day or two, untroubled by food,  
And our work done, die.

HODGE'S WIFE. But a man's work can not  
be done in a day or two.

CHATTERTON. No, it takes a lifetime.

HODGE. What is your work, neighbor?

When I close shop at midnight,  
I see your candle burning. Do you read so  
late?  
You must be fond of reading.

CHATTERTON. I used to be;  
But now the taste is easily chewed out  
Of what I read. Each generation  
Finds the charm again—for a while.  
These dry words of ours were poetry.  
Take *mouse* from a verb that meant in Sans-  
krit,  
*Steal*; a thief, now called a mouse,  
If many use it, *mouse* is plain *thief*,  
The mouse forgotten. Whatever men can  
make  
Has their mortality. Talking of mice,  
A rat haunts my room. Can you spare ar-  
senic?

HODGE. Certainly.  
Let me get some while we talk of it. (*He*  
*goes out.*)

HODGE'S WIFE. But what do you do?

CHATTERTON. I write—  
Music after a fashion; a sulky music,  
Made out of ordinary speech,  
The way a sculptor might make statues  
Out of sand, or carve wooden spools  
The housewife throws away.

HODGE'S WIFE. . . . Whatever you do,  
You must take care of yourself to do it.  
Eat well and in time; but if you are poor,  
What is there to be ashamed of?  
Jesus was poor, the apostles begged their way.  
We have enough and to spare.  
You must come and eat with us;  
Pride in such a little matter  
Is silly. Be proud of your work  
And humble yourself for it. When you can,  
You will repay.  
What a little matter and not worth this fuss!  
Promise that you are coming in to supper.  
Promise me!

CHATTERTON. Why?

HODGE'S WIFE. Do you not love your work?

CHATTERTON. I used to . . .  
I might write reams, catch in that mass of  
cobweb  
A few phrases, in time sucked dry.  
When I was a boy I played at blocks; and  
then tired,  
Gave the little building a kick: down  
It came with a little crash.  
Why did I grow tired? I saw  
The little building empty and its sky,  
The plaster ceiling.

HODGE (*entering*). Here's your arsenic.

CHATTERTON. Thanks. I must go. Thanks  
for your friendliness.

HODGE'S WIFE. I'll keep supper waiting.  
You must come.

CHATTERTON. Good-bye. (*He goes out.*)

HODGE'S WIFE. Hodge . . . I think . . .  
Take back the arsenic!

HODGE Why?

HODGE'S WIFE. He'll poison himself!

HODGE. You have such fancies.

HODGE'S WIFE. Tell him you were mistaken,  
it isn't arsenic. Run, take it away!

HODGE. Don't be silly.

### *Scene Ten*

(*In his garret, Chatterton pours the arsenic  
into a glass of water, but hesitates to drink.  
On his table are papers which he tears up,  
strewing the floor. He reads*)

Item: One poem, one shilling; item: one article, five pounds; two songs, one shilling; one squib . . . (*He tears up the sheet.*)

Dear Doctor Barrett:—I implore you by your former kindness to help me to a position on an African brig. I have come to the end of my resources and have neither strength nor prospects to strengthen me. (*He tears it up.*)

August first, one month and no answer. He might have answered, even a refusal. (*Dipping into and tearing to bits manuscript until the floor is covered.*) Trash, trash!

Tories, Whigs, Lord This, Lord That. England.

Will England last longer than Rome or Egypt?  
It will not outlast the earth.

What have I to do with these, to build arguments

For the Court, against the Court,  
That I may eat, lodge, write more arguments.  
If men were like winds with no important bellies

That fill, empty, and must be filled daily;  
If I were rich enough to wander  
Beside rivers or through streets;  
Put words together carefully.  
But to write this over and over,  
That I may live,  
Teach my feet to walk to prose,  
Cant, rant, smart as any . . .  
I might eat there . . .  
But will they not tire?  
What money can there be in my traffic with  
the moon.  
What is your business? Did they not ask  
to-night?  
And afterwards surely.  
But what is business for a man?  
Sell clothes or grain,  
Ride waves, furrow the earth, the gull's com-  
panion or the ox's;  
Build house or bridge for men to crawl upon;  
Try to comprehend the world in whose sky  
Earth is a star?  
These green grains of arsenic  
Will dissolve the earth  
Into the nothingness that once it was;  
Unflesh me of my hungers, those persistent  
curs,  
Pull out the riddles worming in my brain,  
And write the answer zero  
To the subtraction.  
Too long a grace over so little meat. (*He*  
*drinks the poison and walks up and down*  
*in silent agony.*)

### Scene Eleven

(*The same room at night. Chatterton goes to the window.*)

The street-lamps under the clouded night  
Have made the sky grey. Half the earth  
Is dark. In the universal night  
Day was a little shelter.  
“Is it not beautiful,” they would say  
Of light. Burning-glass,

Resting your spot of light on me,  
When floor and street were stinking hot,  
I am rid of you.  
No longer to fly about you, sun, with other  
moths;  
Because I burn.  
Rid of you, too, broken trinket  
In the rhinestone glitter of stars,  
Unburied corpse, swelling and misshapen,  
Eaten away by those white ants, the stars.  
Shine, sun and moon, for those at ease;  
For these you are beautiful;  
But to me, caught in this street,  
A small cloud travelling across a cloudy sky,  
A stick now caught in the surf,  
Being drawn away, now flung ashore,  
To be drawn away again;  
A poisoned rat that slowly leaves his hole—  
If I were Sampson  
To push these walls away.

### *Scene Twelve*

(*An alley into which Chatterton enters from the crowded street.*)

I place anger upon my head like an iron crown, hurting my temples;  
I would fillip the carriages and speed them screeching away;  
Like a truckman, lashing his horses ~  
Until they pound the stone pavement with broad hoofs, sparks flying about them,  
Strike and strike.

If I had the anger of a cloud,  
I would scoop up rain in my palms and fling it upon the people, bowing heads and hurrying into doorways;  
Then with lightning I would split the houses And fire cover the ruins like a sudden fungus.  
Pile up cities, trample grass into pavement, for every tree, chimneys;  
With your steep hills of brick, cover the earth;

My resignation is tendered. . . .

Pity these walls, winds and rain,  
Pity these habitations of men.

Will London, too, be a waste like Babylon?  
They will build again by other rivers.

Will they not be tired at last as I am,  
When they have dragged the unknown merchandise,  
If the wagon carries any;  
In reins and blinkers,  
Have made the same turns and gone the same  
streets  
Often enough?

### *Scene Thirteen*

(*Chatterton climbs to the top of a hill.*)

These trees with many arms stretch out and  
up  
To hold me. So is life sweetened  
To make it palatable.  
Desires, satiety, our uncertain doom and of  
those dear to us,  
Human ills like numbering itself,  
Senses and mind make endurable:  
As in the taste of food, for which we try  
much tasteless, stale, or rancid;  
As in a few words' meaning, for which we  
hear  
So much trite and foolish.  
For keener sight we pay with keener sight  
Of ugly streets and ugly men and women.  
The good, itself part pay for sorrow, the lure  
to keep us living,  
Through our senses and our minds  
We must pay back with usury.  
If we play red or black, we lose.  
Still, the players have the game's excitement.  
But must I sit it out? Surely a loser  
May leave early.  
I'll take no more goods, pay

No more bills. Although a little sooner than  
the rest,  
File a bankruptcy petition;  
The store locked, the blinds down, the clerks  
discharged.  
Beautiful striped fabric, green and blue of  
day and the dark band of night,  
Embroidered so closely and ingeniously,  
I cannot handle you at a profit.  
Business is bad,  
Or, perhaps, I am a bad business man.  
Now let me deal in the plain black shoddy of  
death.

*Scene Fourteen*

CHATTERTON. Ocean, bitter salt water, larger  
than continents, incessantly troubled,  
In whose cold night the fish and knotted  
weeds have their being,  
Feeding upon each other and drowned men;  
Loud in my own ears,  
At a little distance I am dumb, mouth open,  
shril and dumb;  
As here those other waves are silent,  
An edge of white along the black water.  
Silence is more dignified than speech;  
Certainly more dignified than ineffectual  
speech;  
And dignity is most dignity,  
When in the stiff persistent pose of death.  
Let me be dignified at last. Let me,  
Chatterton, the scrivener's apprentice,  
The listener-in at circles of the great in cof-  
fee-houses,  
The great-eyed watcher from the walks of  
those  
In carriages or on horses, be dignified as any.  
He who was hungry shall himself give food,  
And who was badly clothed and sheltered,  
shall himself  
Be a lodging. Munificence of death . . .  
Beautiful, you were beautiful, sea, and beau-  
tiful was your companion, land.

But what is beauty merely? A beautiful woman,  
Seen often enough, her skin is skin,  
Hair, hair, eyes, eyes, nose, nose, mouth,  
mouth,  
Blurred into a face.  
I am a drunken man who leans aside, vomiting,  
And from his other side pushes the woman.

### Scene Fifteen

(*Night. A square in the city. On the benches are seated men and women, among them Chatterton.*)

A GIRL (*to Chatterton*). Jolly in the work-room, all the girls at tables;  
As they work, they laugh and chatter to each other,  
Laugh and chatter at each other.  
Now and then, the old forewoman screams;  
And all are silent for a moment,  
Then begin to whisper,  
And are laughing, chattering noisily as ever;  
Until the old forewoman screams  
And all are silent for a moment, but a moment.  
The heavy white-washed timbers of the ceiling,  
The red brick walls, unplastered and unpainted—  
I make believe that I am in my castle sewing  
And the others are my maids about me, all my maids in rows along the hall.  
The old forewoman, rudely interrupting,  
Is a parrot, that my lord and master brought me from the east;  
And we all are sewing brocade, pearls and gold thread upon velvet,  
For my lord and master and myself.  
What we sew is shoddy and we sew on wooden buttons, painted black to look like bone,  
Sewing fast with hard stout cotton;

And I laugh out shrilly at the girl who sits  
beside me,

And we all laugh out together,

And we try to make each other small as each  
one knows herself;

Only to the old forewoman we speak gently.

And when we catch her looking we sew away,  
away.

When the streets in winter are still befogged  
with night,

Or early summer mornings when the sky is  
blue and cool—

A SECOND GIRL. Why should she complain,  
who is out

Among others, making friends with girls and,  
perhaps, men;

While I have to stay home among pots and  
dishes,

The broom's companion.

AN OLD WOMAN. Why should either of  
you talk,

Young and strong. The old should complain,  
Servants to our daughters and our sons' wives.

Scolded and taught—much good it does us—  
We hold our mouths close;

No use talking to the young and wise.

We sit beside the stove. Our spoons shake  
When we lift them to our lips;

We spill food over ourselves,

Dirty with age. The hair has fallen

From our scalps, leaving us bald women;

And into the deep wrinkles of our faces,

Dirt sifts. We keep staring

Out of flabby eyes. Strength has gone from  
us

Suddenly. We had just begun making our-  
selves comfortable,

Now our children are grown up, we had been  
saying,

Now we know that we are neither to be great  
nor rich,

Let us rest a while,

Let us begin to take pleasure in our lives,

Such as they are; and saying so,  
We found ourselves old.

AN OLD MAN (*to Chatterton*). Aren't you  
sick of stories of the poor?  
But if we knew Cæsar or a scholar like Abe-  
lard,  
Perhaps we would wonder  
How easily men become great among men;  
And if we could see Helen herself, we might  
say,  
I have seen such.  
The great and little hang from the mind,  
Leaves of a tree until the winter of death;  
Again and again, the mind stirs to a noisy  
life  
Lives of many, pebbles along its shore;  
But are you not eager to forget  
The faces of men and women  
And your own ugly face?

A WOMAN. Look at the froth on his lips.

ANOTHER WOMAN. He has poisoned him-  
self.

THE BLACK DEATH.

## THE BLACK DEATH

### Scene One

(*A room in a Jew's house in a town of western Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Two old Jews, the master of the house and a guest, have just dined. They say in a low voice the benediction after eating.*  
*After a pause)*

HOST. What news?

GUEST. In our Granada the Messiah has  
not come.

Some of us do well, some not so well.

HOST. To judge from what in our syna-  
gogue

Some say, I thought that in Granada  
Jews rode the clouds for carriages.  
Thanks for your news of no news.  
Have you not heard of a new sickness  
Coming westward?

GUEST. I hear of this and that always.  
Young, each new war I asked about  
Eagerly, and *what new book?* I used to ask.  
I saw then whatever is, matters,  
But afterwards saw, matters slightly.  
So deeply rooted in the earth is man,  
Nothing to the tree can matter much,  
Until in its own time it age and die.  
Why still be fluttered  
By news of doctrines and king's policies,  
Even disasters?

HOST. But if this wind  
Carry you away?

GUEST. It will.  
Tell me about my room,  
My street, my chair, or dish, about the sun  
Or night. I like the rough touch of bread,

The warm smell it had, the brown loaf  
Upon the table. The room with this sunlight  
On the floor, or at night,  
The candle's glow against the darkness.

HOST. This sickness worries me. Have  
debtors  
Here and there, and then, life itself—  
My daughter . . .  
Doctors see death many times, but a doctor  
is in tears,  
When his own mother dies. If you thought  
This sickness would come home, you too  
Could not shake off this news so lightly.  
Do you know that Christians indebted to us,  
Say that we spread the plague?

GUEST. When we were in Egypt, a pharaoh  
came  
Who knew not Joseph. When Charlemagne  
was emperor,  
He sent for us. Charlemagne is dead.  
A time to read holy books in rooms  
Whose windows open upon gardens.  
Does not winter follow summer?  
They had it well and we must have it ill.  
Is this news?

HOST. That Judah had back his own land  
And we were in our walled town, Jerusalem;  
That we were ploughing our land,  
And that our poets spoke their own speech,  
Not Aramaic or Spanish.

GUEST. Had Israel a land? Was Canaan  
ours,  
Which we took a while and never held  
Against Assyrian or Roman?  
When Solomon was king was the land  
Israel's?  
"My father punished you with whips,"  
Rehoboam said.  
Palestine was a halting-place,  
One of many. Our kin, the Arabs,

Wander over their desert. Our desert  
Is the earth. Our strength  
Is that we have no land.  
Nineveh and Babylon, our familiar cities,  
Became dust; but we Jews had left  
For Alexandria and Rome.  
When the land is impoverished, as lands be-  
come,  
The tree dies. Israel is not planted,  
Israel is in the wind. Cut at the wind  
With swords, set fires under it;  
A little smoke a little while, the smoke  
Uncurls and is gone. Take no threats to heart;  
This may be the end of you and me;  
But for all the grains of sand blown  
From the desert, the desert is;  
And all the waves that spill upon the shores  
Leave the sea full.

HOST. Some get drunk on words, but I,  
like most,  
Must have substance. Thanks for your words,  
I offer wine. (*He does so. Before drinking,  
they say the benediction in a low voice.*)

### *Scene Two*

(*The council chamber of the town.*)

FIRST COUNCILLOR. Month after month and  
all day long, fog,  
In which their sun was a yellow stain  
And men and trees turned yellow  
And then grey. At times the earth suddenly  
heaved  
And shook.

SECOND COUNCILLOR. They say  
Crowded China and India are dead.

FIRST COUNCILLOR. The Genoese fleeing  
Crimean Caffa  
Report Armenia covered with dead  
Along roads, blocking streets of towns,  
And in deserts caravans,  
Their men, camels, and dogs dead;  
The Kurds fled to the hills and dying

On cliffs, in gorges; and ships, crews dead,  
Blown about the Black Sea.

THIRD COUNCILLOR. What Noah's ark can  
ride this flood?

FIRST COUNCILLOR. The dying Turks be-  
sieging Caffa  
Tied their own dead instead of stones upon  
the catapults  
And shot them to the city; the Genoese  
Scraped from roofs and cobblestones,  
Until the harbor bobbed with bloody scraps  
And white bellies of dead fish.  
Who could among the Genoese took ship  
And fled—to die in Italy  
And bring their kinsmen death.  
Heathen and Christian, man and beast alike,  
As if there were no God Who set man and  
beast apart,  
No Saviour for the Christians.

THIRD COUNCILLOR. In Africa are cities  
In which nothing lives. No smudge of fire  
upon the walls;  
An enemy, not to be shot at, overcame them.  
God sends a flood to drown sinners.

THE MAYOR (*entering*). The plague is near.  
I have the news from Rudolph,  
Back from his trading. At Coblenz half are  
dead, the rest in the fields,  
From which the peasants drive them. And  
so elsewhere.  
The citizens look to us; we must not in the  
thunder and lightning of these times  
Become ourselves distracted. There are enough  
who will be.  
Here and now we must consider how to save  
the city;  
And if our means will not avail, as probably  
they will not,  
What means we have to care for sick, dead,  
and the remnant.  
As to the known causes of this disease,

This is clear: it spreads from man to man;  
The sick poison the sound by touch or breath,  
Or by the body's odour; for, it is said,  
The sick at once decay. We must decree,  
therefore,  
That no one come within our walls, stranger  
or former townsman.

FIRST COUNCILLOR. Rudolph has come.

MAYOR. From Rudolph we have learnt the  
danger.

Let no one in; let in no merchandise.

THIRD COUNCILLOR. What good are walls,  
What good decrees, when you wall in  
The Jews with us?

SECOND COUNCILLOR. The plague, Jews say,  
is their Messiah.

FIRST COUNCILLOR. They may be innocent  
or they may be guilty,  
Who knows? We know that they are strangers,  
Who lived among Chaldeans and Assyrians,  
And are suddenly here  
In our everyday streets, this fourteenth cen-  
tury.

MAYOR. My people! like a lost traveller,  
Who fears on each bough a beast's implacable  
hate,  
Or in a bush a suddenly moving snake. . . .  
But even if the Jews are harmless, they should  
be watched  
To quiet those of us who fear them, and  
perhaps,  
They are not harmless. Let all of them be  
shut up in one house.  
Let their wealth be taken into our fund;  
Apart, they still are part of us;  
And must bear our sorrow with their own.  
But let a watch be set about the house  
That none go in or out, and that none  
Still harm those whom we now harm . . .

For all decrees, whether we live or die,  
Turns on a game of chance, in which we are  
The coins; of some value, each with a human  
face;

This kept, but this, from the same die—(*The mayor vomits a stream of blood and pitches across the table. The others, aghast, leave.*)

### *Scene Three*

(Before the house of the Jews. The guard calls to a passer-by.)

GUARD. Neighbor!

PASSER-BY. My daughter is dead.

GUARD. She?

PASSER-BY. She, too.  
I wrapped her in the sheet in which she lay  
And carried her beyond the walls.  
Now I am plague,  
Breathing plague, carrying plague in my hands.

GUARD You might have waited  
Until those whose work it is  
Took care of her.

PASSER-BY. The rich  
With jewels in their ears and linen bed-clothes  
Are cared for. Who takes care of us?  
Among scavengers who carted in the dead,  
Were fathers and mothers dragging dead  
children  
And children dragging dead parents.  
I left her in a pit, deeper than a man un-  
helped could climb from,  
Shallow with dead.  
She who loved whatever lived, and at work,  
Stroked dishes and furniture,  
Tore at herself,  
As if to pull up the thick root, her heart,

And end the plague's violence.

GUARD. She was not alone in suffering.

PASSER-BY. So much the worse.

GUARD. If good times pass, bad times also pass.

PASSER-BY. Yes, we shall rebuild. We have  
the spider's stubborn mechanism;  
To stop and reason is to starve and die.  
So you are still on guard.  
The magistrates can still spare men to guard  
The emperor's precious Jews.

GUARD. We guard ourselves.  
Some say that they have seen  
Jews blowing plague upon us  
In eastern dust.

PASSER-BY. Have Jews brought this plague?

GUARD It is said so.

PASSER-BY. I would dig into their flesh!  
Hurting may be a cure for hurt.  
Can I revenge myself upon the stars,  
Or whatever makes this this or that that,  
My daughter live and then my daughter dead.  
If Jews bring this death, the world's intelligible.  
But if Jews bring this death, who is the principal  
Of these agents? Jews, sea-hydras, lions, rats,  
and vermin  
We kill, rightly we think; these, small as  
ourselves.  
We can not reach beyond our reach,  
And so are not to see beyond our sight . . .  
Jews, I have had too much of death  
To kill. Kill or be killed, I am indifferent.  
*(A crowd enters, circling about three musicians. Their instruments are a large drum,*

*a viol, and a pipe. The viol and pipe play snatches of jolly songs. As he talks, the drummer beats his drum.)*

DRUMMER. Listen, all of you, plague-sick or to-be-plague-sick,  
To my speech, like a Jew's speech, voluble,  
Hot and salted with the name of God, his famous countryman;  
Listen, you men and women, strutting like lunatics,  
Each thinking himself or herself, god or goddess,  
Or at least king or queen; be comforted, each of you, saith your prophet,  
You are not Atlas to the world's stability.  
Laugh, shout, scream, or weep;  
Leap, stand, kneel, or lie down,  
The heavens stay up, the world endures.  
Death comes suddenly or slowly; be careless or take thought,  
Death is a plague with which we are all infected.  
What good will crying to the Lord for mercy do us?  
Has He mercy upon fish or upon beetles?  
The dogs are His; does He bother more about them?  
Just, His tribes are equal.  
Eat, drink, and be merry, it was said; to-morrow we die.  
To-morrow, they said, meaning *some day*;  
But for us it is literal, to-morrow we die.  
What shall we eat and drink? Have we money?  
Take to-day, I answer, whatever you wish,  
for to-morrow you die.  
If you are made in God's image, be cruel  
As He to just and unjust, wolves and cattle.  
Take whatever you wish, for to-morrow you die.  
The Jews' house!

*(The crowd flings itself against the door. The*

*flagellants are heard coming. The monk enters, staggering under a huge crucifix. He is followed by a procession of barefoot men and women, singing a hymn, in their left hands lighted candles. They whip themselves.)*

THE MONK. The cherubim are hushed and sorrowful  
The Lord arises, looking down to us. . . .  
For our sins, O Lord, for our sins!

A FLAGELLANT. The Lord is just!

ANOTHER. Else no order!

ANOTHER. The Lord is merciful!

THE MONK. (*pointing at the Jew's house*).  
Sinners have brought the plague upon us!  
(All push against the door. In the clamour are heard drum, viol and pipe, and the flagellants' hymn.)

#### *Scene Four*

(Within the Jews' house. Either side the door Jews, wrapped in prayer-cloths, stand at their prayers, rocking backwards and forwards. Now and then their chant is lifted into a wail. Suddenly the shouting outside and the pounding on the door stop. The Jews stare at each other. Then the door is struck a powerful blow. Those outside are using a beam as a ram. The blow is repeated at intervals.

#### *Scene Five*

(In the same town, within a Jew's house. The master of the house and a guest have just dined.)

HOST. What news among our Jews in Hamburg?

GUEST. Much as here.  
If you have time to-morrow, show me  
Where the massacre was.

HOST. The first visit to our city?

GUEST. Yes.  
How do you live among the Gentiles now?

HOST. Not worse than you in Hamburg.

GUEST. Evil done to man, like this plague,  
and evil men do,  
Like sores upon a healthy body, scab and fall  
off.

HOST. If the body is healthy, sores?

GUEST. These at least are gone, your city  
once more crowded.

HOST. The disease is in the blood to break  
out again.

GUEST. We shall live through it as before.

HOST. A tree has new leaves many times,  
but in the end the tree dies.

GUEST. Are not other trees left?

HOST. In the end the land sinks under the  
sea.

GUEST. Are not other lands raised?

HOST. The earth itself will crumble out of  
the sky.

GUEST. Will there not be other stars?

HOST. Far away.

GUEST. This plague and massacre, these at  
least are gone.

HOST. The dream is gone, not what caused  
the dream.

MERIWETHER LEWIS.

## MERIWETHER LEWIS

### *Scene One*

(*Sioux warriors with scalp sticks are dancing about fires to the noise of drums. Lewis and another, backs to the audience, are watching.*)

SOLDIER. The Mandans warned us, Captain Lewis, how treacherous these Sioux are; In the frenzy of this dance, is there nothing to fear?

LEWIS. Show no fear and there is nothing to fear.

SOLDIER. Their dancing files are about our scattered men.  
Would it not have been better to have kept together?

LEWIS. That would have shown us afraid. They do not know our strength, seeing us calm;  
Keep calm, and they will not know our weakness.

SOLDIER. I wish that I were out of this.

LEWIS. The way through  
is the way out.  
Any other way is harder. Do and do,  
Like the witches in Macbeth; but do not stop  
To value what you do. It is pastime. . . .  
Ferocity is painted on their faces;  
But if they should turn upon us,  
Men are not Promethean to live forever, tor-  
tured.

### *Scene Two*

(*An expanse of snow in the mountains. Lewis and another are hardly able to walk.*)

LEWIS. Here they went. See, here!

SOLDIER.

What's this?

LEWIS. Horse guts. They have killed a horse for food.

SOLDIER. Here is the head. The lips have flesh.

LEWIS. Can you cut them off? My hands are stiff.

SOLDIER. The head is frozen hard. They must have gone by yesterday.

LEWIS. Let's carry the head to that cleft and build a fire.

Whose horse was it? This is Clark's, I think.  
See the white forehead.

When we cut off your lips, horse, you will begin to grin.

SOLDIER. I can't walk now. Let's rest a moment.

Is it beginning to snow? Is that snow or stars?

Do you feel snow falling?

LEWIS. Nothing is falling. All is frozen fast,  
The stars are frozen to the sky and these snow-covered mountains,  
Rising behind each other, are frozen to their base.

Men live and work and what they are,  
Snowed under with their earth at last.

But what we are

Is born on other stars, in turn to die there;  
And what men in their orbits signify, the stars signify and that is—

We, whose lives are in years, bother about Timeless matters; and daily see

The bright roof, our sky, dissolving into darkness.

Come on now, and we two Salomes help each

other with this head.  
(They do so.)

What follows a straight line may end somewhere,  
But stars go in circles. I throw up my head  
spinning to the stars.  
I kill time until time kills me.  
One shot from this pistol, or five seconds  
falling into that abyss—  
The earth is still.

### *Scene Three*

(Night. The Pacific surf is heard. Lewis' and Clark's soldiers break up camp.)

A SOLDIER. (waiting for the start, to another.) I am so sleepy. . . . I wish that I could sleep, crawl into my own bed between the cool sheets, in my own room in my own house. . . .  
The last time I was on furlough, a farmer gave me a lift. I fell asleep and when I woke—  
Beside the wide blue Hudson, twinkling with sunshine, and the cart taking me home.  
To be coming up that road now, even if the sky were grey and the coldest wind blowing, chunks of ice hiding the water.  
If I could only get a little sleep. While we wait, I'll just close my eyes, just close my eyes a little. . . .

SECOND SOLDIER. There's something in the bush, listen! . . .

FIRST SOLDIER. Nothing.  
A ship waiting at the river's mouth, traders' ships along the coast and after all, no ship.  
All over again, Indians, rowing, portage, mountains, portage, rowing and Indians.

SECOND SOLDIER. Listen, something in the bush. . . . listen. . . .

*Scene Four*

(*A village on the Mississippi. A cannon is heard. Cheers. Afterwards, Lewis, Clark, and citizens enter. Lewis is playing with his pistol.*)

CITIZEN. Well, Captain Lewis, the country had given up hope of your returning.

SECOND CITIZEN. Gone three years.

FIRST CITIZEN. You're the next President, if you choose to be. They were talking of Congress voting land, if you'd get back. (*He turns to Clark.*) They ought to make it ten thousand acres apiece. Jefferson will make you governor of Missouri, Capt. Lewis.

And we need a good man what with all that's going on. The trouble is frontiers get the riff-raff. The steady decent people stay back home; those with a screw loose, loafers, goal-birds, and bankrupts in the States float here.

THIRD CITIZEN. The whole country is going to hell. A man from New York was here and he tells me the papist Irish are landing there in droves. You can see them any day, coming from the Battery, in rags, not a penny to their name, drunk the lot of them; men, women and brats boozing from the same bottle. This will be a fine country in nineteen hundred and six with those breeding in it. We've kicked out George the Third to have the Pope instead.

SECOND CITIZEN. A minister had an article about it in the ladies' journal my wife gets.

THIRD CITIZEN. There's not much use bothering about this part of the country.

Down the river they had an earthquake  
a while back. That's the kind of a coun-  
try it is. And there ain't a river like the  
Mississippi in all the land. It'll change  
its course overnight and wipe out a town-  
ship. A man that'll farm beside that river  
is a fool; and a town that's built beside  
that river is a town of fools.

FIRST CITIZEN. Some folks around here,  
Captain Lewis, make more trouble than  
any river. Let me tell you—well, after  
dinner; come on, gentlemen. (*The citi-  
zens walk on*).

CLARK. (*to Lewis*). Why do you act  
towards them with such respect?

LEWIS. I too thought respect ought to be  
deserved;  
Now I simulate respect out of pity.

CLARK. You should attack; you mislead  
them into thinking their littleness affirmed.

LEWIS. I am not interested in attacking  
littleness.

CLARK. Everything on earth is little, if it  
comes to that.

LEWIS. It has come to that. (*They follow  
the others*.)

### *Scene Five*

LEWIS. I am Meriwether Lewis;  
Blood not the least in Virginia, ancestors  
Back me up;  
Am trained to read and untwist  
Meanings to the first strands;  
To outride and outshoot many;  
Have money enough, am not like most  
Indentured to a room, nor fenced

Within a county;  
But within the scoop of sugar  
The grocer used in filling up this paper bag,  
So plump and neatly tied,  
Were ants.

Perhaps, the leasehold in our bodies  
Is held in trust.  
So many strings,  
That if we fall, what else  
Falls also, or what bells are jangled—  
I asked for work so huge, laborious, needing  
so much time,  
That taking it away in shovelsful,  
I might forget myself.

Mr. Jefferson commissioned me  
To go through the unknown lands  
Westward. The world has still too many  
tyrannies

For our republic to be content  
With narrow limits. Like a man against a  
cliff,

I kept my mind upon the work in hand,  
And dared not look away from the next grasp  
and foothold.

The work is ended.  
What is worth doing? Administer  
The petty laws?









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